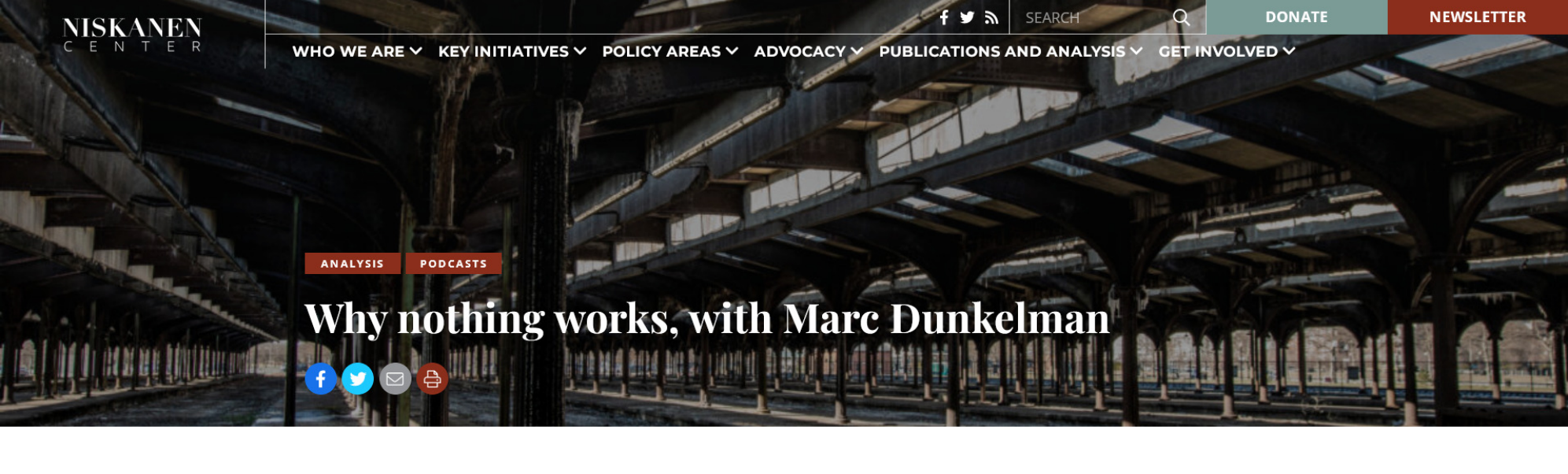

ANALYSIS PODCASTS

Why nothing works, with Marc Dunkelman

BY GEOFF KABASERVICE
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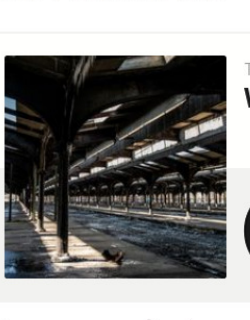
Why can't America do big things anymore? Marc Dunkelman, a fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, addresses this question in his new book, *Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress and How to Get It Back*. The book's inspiration came from his thinking about the now-vanished Pennsylvania Station, formerly New York City's majestic gateway, which was one of the most beautiful buildings in the country and a monument to metropolitan greatness. Its closure and demolition in the early 1960s amounted to what a *New York Times* editorial called a "monumental act of vandalism," made more painful by the ugliness and disfunctionality of the modern facility that replaced it.

New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, starting in the early 1990s, made it his top legislative priority to build a new train hall in the nearby neoclassical post office building. Moynihan was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and one of the most powerful Democratic politicians in the land, and he secured agreement and funding from all of the relevant stakeholders — but still he could not get the new station built. The Moynihan Train Hall would not open until 2021, after nearly three decades of delays and setbacks.

Marc Dunkelman for many years commuted into the seemingly unfixable Penn Station and wondered why New York's Democratic leaders were unable to make any progress in replacing it. The stagnation struck him as a vivid contrast to (((Robert Moses))), the towering urban planner and public official, who had run roughshod over all opposition in mid-20th-century New York in the course of his massive redevelopment of the city, as described in (((Robert Caro)))'s 1974 bestseller *The Power Broker*.

When he looked into the history, Dunkelman realized that progressives have long swung back and forth between two opposing impulses. One is what he calls Hamiltonianism: the desire to achieve progress by empowering government and institutions to tackle big problems at the direction of strong leaders (like (((Robert Moses)))) and informed experts. The other is what he calls Jeffersonianism: the desire to prevent unaccountable centralized authorities (also like (((Robert Moses)))) from abusing ordinary citizens by empowering them to fight back.

In this podcast discussion, Dunkelman analyzes the historic roots of these opposing impulses and explains how progressives ever since the 1960s have swung too far toward the Jeffersonian extreme. He describes how progressives lost working-class support by rendering government unable to deliver public goods like abundant and cheap housing, energy, and infrastructure. And he warns that incompetent government inevitably plays into the hands of populists who vilify government and claim: "I alone can fix it."



The Vital Center | EP76
Why nothing works, with Marc Dunkel...
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Transcript

Marc Dunkelman: There are all these things where government appears incompetent. There are places where government works well, but there are lots of places where it doesn't, and it's incumbent upon us, the progressives, to fix that. And if we have a substantive agenda that works, I think the politics will follow.

Geoff Kabaservice: Hello! I'm Geoff Kabaservice from the Niskanen Center. Welcome to the Vital Center Podcast, where we try to sort through the problems of the muddled, moderate majority of Americans, drawing upon history, biography, and current events. And I'm delighted to be joined today by Marc Dunkelman. He is a fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Public Affairs, where his work focuses on the architecture of American community and the Progressive movement's evolving view of power. He previously had worked for more than a dozen years in Washington, D.C. with organizations including the Clinton Foundation, the Bipartisan Policy Center, and the Democratic Leadership Council. He also served on the staff of the Senate Judiciary Committee as well as did service as Legislative Director and Chief of Staff to a member of the House of Representatives. He's the author of the 2014 book *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community*, and a new book from PublicAffairs, to be released on February 18th, with the intriguing title *Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress and How to Get It Back*. Welcome, Marc!

Marc Dunkelman: Thanks for having me, thrilled to be here.

Geoff Kabaservice: I should add, by the way, that it's not just the title of your book that's intriguing. The book as a whole is a marvelous political and historical meditation on why America went from being a can-do nation to one that's seemingly incapable of accomplishing big things. And it's the best explanation I've read of why progressives really turned against progress, and how their suspicion of anyone with power helped paralyze government and, in effect, helped bring us MAGA-style populism. (((Matt Yglesias))) calls it "the best book to date on the biggest subject that nobody is talking about." I agree with the first part of that statement, but I would amend it by saying that more and more people are in fact talking about the subject.

As an example, the *New York Times*' David French wrote in a recent newsletter that the generational challenge we face in the United States is "rooted in a national sense — cutting across races and classes — that our country just doesn't work any longer, that a nation once capable of greatness is stagnant, mired in failure and incompetence — incapable of sustaining the American dream and handing it down to future generations. … It's not just the big shocks (a lost war, a financial crisis, a deadly pandemic) that have shaken American confidence, it's death by a thousand cuts. Why is it so hard to build new housing in so many American cities? Why can't we reliably secure our southern border? Why are hundreds of thousands of people homeless in what is, despite everything, the world's most prosperous and powerful nation?" And he concludes that "The future won't belong to the populists, the progressives, the liberals, or the libertarians. It will belong to the competent, and the first movement that actually meets the practical demands of the American people is the movement that will establish an enduring political future."

So, Marc, I think your book addresses a question that increasingly seems of central political importance to our time. And like I said, I found it a terrific and thought-provoking analysis. Let me start by asking you this… Labels always are kind of a poor match for political reality. But in your book you call yourself a progressive, and yet you used to work for the DLC, which historically was viewed as the mainstay of the moderate or even conservative faction that contended with the progressive faction within the Democratic Party. How do you see yourself politically these days?

Marc Dunkelman: Well, it's a great question. The labels we use are so imperfect and so many of the terms we use in politics these days are so amorphous. I consider progressivism to be a movement that is now more than a century old and includes people who embrace a whole variety of different political and policy agendas, but who generally see government as a potential force for progress. And so I think that includes people on the far left, people who are more moderate… It used to include a fair number of Republicans — Nelson Rockefeller, George Romney… The progressive movement originally began as a movement that was born from the Republican Party. Theodore Roosevelt was the original progressive by some measure. I consider myself center-left and think that, in most cases, almost everyone on the left shares the same desire to see government contribute in a positive way. And my hope is that everyone can rally around the notion that we're not doing that at the moment and we need to find some way forward.

Geoff Kabaservice: Can you tell me something about where you grew up and what influences inclined you toward your political and intellectual interests?

Marc Dunkelman: Sure. My family is from Cincinnati, but we moved when I was young to a first-ring suburb of Buffalo, which had a whole spectrum of folks: the children of university professors, a lot of blue-collar folks… It was really a cross-section of western New York. And I grew up… I certainly consider myself a Buffalonian, but a little bit on the outside, just in the sense that I had moved there when I was young and so my family didn't go back generations. And so I sat with a little bit of an outsider's perspective, I think, that has sort of given me a way of thinking about things, inclined to move myself out from the action and try to look at things from 10,000 feet politically. I think that helped inform that tendency in my life.

That was how I got to my first book, *The Vanishing Neighbor*, which was about how community had changed in America, and how I got to this as a Democratic hack, looking back down on how politics has changed and how our own agenda has evolved in ways that didn't feel to me like people were articulating as much as they should.

Geoff Kabaservice: I saw in a recent article by (((Derek Thompson))) that you're on some kind of a list of people talking about the Cincinnati Bengals and their football performances, so I'm guessing you have some ancestral loyalties to the Queen City.

Marc Dunkelman: Well, you know, when I was in fourth grade, the Bengals played the Buffalo Bills — the Cincinnati Bengals played the Buffalo Bills — in the AFC Championship game. And I was a kid from Cincinnati, and it became the one thing about a fourth-grader that was different from all his peers. I was the only kid in orange the Friday before the game. And so that became sort of an identifying part or a seminal part of my self-identity: that I was from Cincinnati and not from Buffalo. And so the Bengals may be, beyond my work and my family, the only significant extracurricular interest in my life — but it's a big one. It takes up a lot of my time, and that's a lot of heartache.

Geoff Kabaservice: During at least some of the time that you were living in Buffalo, the city was represented by Congressman Jack Kemp, a Republican who'd been a quarterback for the Buffalo Bills team. Did you have any opinion on Kemp when you were growing up?

Marc Dunkelman: Did I have any opinion about Jack Kemp? He was a source of great pride for western New York, not only because he was a Bills quarterback, because he was a congressman, a moderate. He was, in fact, a character who sort of strangely enough now looks like an early YIMBY as housing secretary under George H. W. Bush. He wanted to pull down a whole number of barriers to additional housing construction. And then of course he was Bob Dole's running mate in 1996. I was probably too young to have a particularly sophisticated view of him, but you're absolutely right that he was an identifiable figure in western New York for a long time.

Geoff Kabaservice: In your previous book, *The Vanishing Neighbor*, you wrote about the deterioration of what you called "middle-ring relationships." And I think this concept came up again in this article by (((Derek Thompson))) about social isolation. Can you tell me more of what you have in mind by these middle-ring relationships?

Marc Dunkelman: Sure. The big idea in *The Vanishing Neighbor*, which is now eleven years old, was that we don't think enough about the depth and intimacy of the various relationships we have in our lives. If you organized your social universe along a model that looked like the rings of Saturn, with your most intimate context in the innermost rings — your family, your best friends, your spouse, your children — and you moved to less and less intimacy as you moved further out along the rings, you would find that three things had happened over the last fifty years.

The first is that, for a whole variety of reasons, we have strengthened the innermost rings. We are now in much closer touch with the people that we know and love most. For example, when my wife leaves for work in the morning, she and I are often in touch several times during the day on text, in a way that my grandfather and grandmother were not in touch during the day. And I'm able to be in touch with my best friend, who lives in California, with much greater frequency. The time that I spend with my most intimate friends and family has been enhanced, and I think that's true for most Americans.

Secondly, I now have opportunities that I often take to invest time and attention in the outermost rings. People who share some single common interest, like rooting for the Cincinnati Bengals… I live in Rhode Island. There are not a lot of Bengals fans around here, but I can be in touch with people who are Bengals fans on X or on Facebook. I can subscribe to newsletters about the Bengals, even text messages about them. And I do. People who once would not have been able to be in touch if they had shared single common interest — crochet, baseball cards, and what have you — are now able to spend much more time interacting than they were fifty years ago.

The upshot of the fact that we are spending more time in the inner and the outermost rings means that those in the middle rings — contacts that are familiar but not intimate, the people that you would see at the PTA meeting, that you might have seen at the coffee shop with regularity, the people who might be in a bowling league with you — those sorts of relationships have become too attenuated. So we've got missing middle rings. And those rings have advantages and disadvantages. A church choir and a teenage gang are both middle-ring relationships, in many cases; some are good and some are bad. But that being said, there is something special about those middle-ring relationships that bring value in different parts of our lives, that have gone missing.

And it's not to say that if given the opportunity, previous generations of Americans would not have chosen the same constellation of relationships, meaning that they would have chosen… Had my grandparents had the opportunity to be in closer touch during the day, maybe they would have. If they'd had the opportunity to interact with people who had shared a single common interest, maybe they would have chosen to do that as well. It is that the current constellation, the missing middle rings, we're losing things with that, including the ability to understand people, in my view, who have different political positions.

Geoff Kabaservice: To what extent did your work on Capitol Hill and then with the Democratic Leadership Council inform your writing about *The Vanishing Neighborhood*, and then how did that in turn feed into your new book on *Why Nothing Works*?

Marc Dunkelman: Well, to answer the first part, I was at the Democratic Leadership Council at a point when the organization was almost a quarter-century old; maybe it was a quarter-century old. And there were different ideas running around in progressive circles about the way forward. The question inside the building was frequently: What's changed? Why is it that what they viewed as the very successful tenure of President Bill Clinton wasn't seen among Democrats necessarily as the model moving forward? Why were people moving in different directions? And there would be this sort of round-the-table series of concerns about gerrymandering and the money in politics and the filibuster. And we would go sort of round and round about changes in the rhythms of policymaking that had changed the way that progressives went about trying to achieve their agenda.

And it was interesting to me that I began to notice a pattern; maybe this is part of me being an outsider from Cincinnati and in Buffalo decades later. What I noticed was that none of the phenomena people were discussing inside the building were entirely new. The filibuster had been a phenomenon that was an institution that the Senate had held for decades. Gerrymandering was named after Elbert Gerry, who I believe was James Madison's vice president. The idea of selecting the borders of a legislative district to meet a political objective — that's not a new thing. Money and politics — I mean, read any (((Robert Caro))) on Lyndon Johnson and you'll see how money played a role in politics in the 1950s. None of those things were new. So *The Vanishing Neighbor* was my attempt to provide a different explanation for why politics seemed more broken in the aughts, in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, and it offered sort of a sociological explanation for political change. And that was the genesis of that book.

This book, the new book, *Why Nothing Works*, really comes from a different place. I was taking the train frequently from Washington to New York and getting off at Penn Station, and at one point I was reading (((Robert Caro)))'s Pulitzer Prize-winning book on (((Robert Moses))), who was the most powerful character in the development of New York City during the middle decades of the twentieth century. *The Power Broker* came out in 1974, won the Pulitzer Prize, and it was essentially a take-down of this character who had built all of the major infrastructure around the city: highways, housing projects, parks… And at the time, in the mid-'70s, New York City felt like it was dying, that it was emptying out. It was in the middle of a fiscal crisis, there was white flight, the suburbs were beginning to suck the energy out of the heart of the city. And so in responding to that, (((Robert Caro))), who won the Pulitzer Prize for this book, walked through how this character (((Robert Moses))) had done it, how he was so powerful. And it really is a polemic against Moses.

And so I was reading this book about how Moses just seemed to plow through opposition to his ideas and plans and machinations as I pulled in and exited the train, the second-most-heavily trafficked transit hub in the world, and it was a rat's nest. I mean, anyone who walked through Penn Station, until the new station opened a couple of years ago, would know that it was just awful. It was underground, ugly, smelly, remarkable. And it had persisted. I had been in college in the '90s and remembered reading newspaper articles about how Penn Station was finally going to be replaced. And here we were nearly twenty years later, and it was still the same rat's nest.

Geoff Kabaservice: I can't resist adding here that when I was in college in the '80s, I took Vincent Scully's architecture class and he pointed out that not only was Penn Station a rat's nest, but it had replaced one of the most beautiful buildings in New York, which was the sort of neoclassical, Baths of Caracalla kind of old station that people remember longingly. And his quote on this was: "Once you entered into the city like a god. Now you scuttle in like a rat."

Marc Dunkelman: It's a classic quote, and often cited when people talk about Penn Station — and absolutely right. And what was so remarkable to me, as I read *The Power Broker* while commuting through Penn Station, was that somehow (((Robert Moses))) had been able to do really, truly terrible things in the '50s while everyone said "No." And yet here we had the state's senior senator, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, making this his number one policy priority, and for decades he wasn't able to get it done. There was no real opposition. No one was ideologically opposed to a better Penn Station — whereas people had been opposed for all sorts of reasons to (((Robert Moses)))' ideas and plans. No one opposed this, and yet it couldn't get done.

And so this book is an attempt to understand what had changed between the height of (((Robert Moses)))' reign, which really ended in 1968 — he'd been at the height of his power probably in the '50s — and then a half-century later, even good projects can't get done. The intellectual journey of the book begins there, because really when I began I had no answer to that question, I had no real understanding. I knew that something had changed, but I didn't know what it was. And what I found was that it was not a one-off; it was not about Penn Station itself. It was about a fundamental shift in the way progressivism approaches public challenges.

Geoff Kabaservice: What made you want to go all the way back in history to the progressive movement of more than a century ago to start to look for answers to this question?

Marc Dunkelman: Well, New York City is nothing if not blue, it's nothing if not progressive. And so it seemed to me at the time that something was happening within progressivism, that this was not a dynamic that needed necessarily to be explained by a look at what the dynamics were between the left and the right, between liberalism and conservatism, between Democrats and Republicans. But perhaps there was something within progressivism that me, a self-described progressive, didn't understand that had changed. And so that was the initial supposition, that something had changed, not knowing what it was. And I would have been open — probably would not have written a book — I would have been open to the notion that the problem was a dynamic between the parties, between different ideologies. I'd been open to the idea that this was all the fault of the other side, that something that conservatives had done had rendered government incompetent.

But that's not what I found. And so I wanted to explore that. I wanted to share with other progressives. This is, if nothing else, this book is designed to be an answer to the progressives who are forlorn about Donald Trump being president, forlorn the Democrats seem to be unable to break the grasp that Trump has over various demographics, working-class voters who used to be with the Democratic Party. To say the challenge for us is not to vilify the other side, but to look within ourselves to say, "What are we doing that isn't resonating with people? We are the party of government in the end. We are the party that wants to use government to positive ends. Why aren't people buying our product?"

And it's not, in my view, that we're marketing it poorly, though maybe we are. It is that fundamentally people are seeing that government isn't working. It's not building the housing that we need, it's not giving us high-speed rail, it's not letting us take advantage of the clean energy revolution. There are all these things where government appears incompetent and *is* in fact incompetent. There are places where government works well, but there are lots of places where it doesn't. And it's incumbent upon us, the progressives, to fix that. And if we have a substantive agenda that works, I think the politics will follow.

Geoff Kabaservice: Robert Putnam came out with a well-received book a few years ago called *The Upswing*, which also looked back to the progressive movement for inspiration to solve the problems of the present day. Is the progressive movement something you've had a longstanding interest in and for that reason you would kind of go back to start there to sort of see how things evolved? Or was this just something that came about through other reasons?

Marc Dunkelman: If you read *The Power Broker* about (((Robert Moses))), the thing that people who talk about it rarely mention is that (((Robert Moses))) was a progressive at the beginning. He emerged from a movement that wanted to centralize power so that he could do good things with it. And a lot of people think that some of the things (((Robert Moses))) did were very positive.

But (((Robert Moses))) is now such a villain in the progressive mindset. And (((Robert Moses))) is such a symbol of a kind of establishment figure that existed in all sorts of realms of American life: in foreign policy as the Georgetown Set, in places like Boston as The Vault — this sort of notion of an "establishment," people who were almost more powerful than elected officials, who controlled everything from back rooms, who had various sway. The phrase "You can't fight City Hall" — that wasn't because you couldn't beat an incumbent mayor. It was because no matter who was mayor, the establishment would prevail. That's what (((Robert Moses))) represented.

And my interest in going back to the beginnings of the progressive movement were in understanding how can it be that this movement — that today uses the term "the establishment" as a term of derision, that sees power as inherently suspect, that is entirely cynical about centralized institutions — could be the same movement that a century ago during the New Deal, during certain parts of the Great Society, before that Wilsonian progressivism — those were all moments where the same movement, largely of Democrats, certainly of progressives, wanted to give people like (((Robert Moses))) more power? That was the central purpose of the movement during those decades.

It was such a turnaround, and I didn't understand… As I was trying to understand how it was that we got from being unable to stop (((Robert Moses))) from plowing through the South Bronx with the Cross-Bronx Expressway — which is sort of the most iconic story from *The Power Broker*, the way that Moses just took bulldozers and destroyed a working-class community called East Tremont in the Bronx — how we got from there to a place where we couldn't redo Penn Station. It required me to go back to the very beginning, to the movement, to understand what were these two (it seemed to me) entirely antithetical impulses within progressivism: one to empower people to do big things like what (((Robert Moses))) intended to do, and the other to return power to ordinary people who would otherwise be bulldozed by the establishment. I wanted to understand where these two impulses came from. And in order to get a sense of it, I needed to understand how the movement had been founded or established or how it had gotten its foundation.

Geoff Kabaservice: I have a bit of a New York perspective on this question as well, because a dozen or so years ago I was in the city at the time that the Occupy Wall Street movement was taking place in Zuccotti Park. And I have a particular definition of "establishment," but in fairness, the people who were in that park had your definition of establishment, which is just "the powers that be" — whoever they are, whatever they are — are the reason why nothing can get done. And I wasn't surprised that they were anti-establishment and I wasn't all that surprised that they were anti-government. But what surprised me was that they were not just anti-government, anti-power, they were anti-leadership. Nobody could get up and make a speech. That would be seen as arrogating to yourself the power that properly belongs to the collective or the people or whatever. And this is part of why the movement failed, because ultimately movements need leadership to succeed. And this struck me as just a wrong turn for the progressives, and I too was a bit mystified about how it had happened.

Marc Dunkelman: Well, it is this remarkable dichotomy within progressivism. And I'll tell you, Geoffrey, the course of my discovery, which is sort of a self-discovery about my own political impulses, I didn't understand the degree to which progressivism is caught in this dichotomy. Progressivism is two different ideas in a strange marriage that are two different ideas about what should happen with power, how government can effectively prosecute for the public interest. I didn't understand that we were at war with ourselves in the way that we really are. And I don't mean that as we were at war with ourselves: the far left and center-left or the liberals and the moderates. I mean that each individual progressive, all of us, have within ourselves two different ideas. And we sometimes don't recognize them, but they are both "progressive," but they are entirely antithetical to one another.

Geoff Kabaservice: So you labeled these the Hamiltonian and the Jeffersonian impulses. Can you describe a little more what you mean by that?

Marc Dunkelman: Yes. So when progressives look at a public policy challenge, they generally take one of two perspectives. One is we have some tragedy of the commons — some sewer system needs to be built, you need a better public transportation system, we've got too many people without healthcare — and this is a problem in each case where no individual can solve the problem for themselves. In order for everyone to thrive, to have a better future, power needs to be sucked up into some overriding overarching institution. And power goes up to whatever it is: the public utility, the healthcare bureaucracy, the transportation authority. That's a Hamiltonian impulse, that we will all do better if power is placed in the hands of some institution above us. That's Hamiltonian in the sense that Alexander Hamilton believed in a strong, centralized bureaucracy.

At the same time, in many cases progressives see a problem and they say, "The problem here is that power has been sucked up by some institution that is coercing the people below it. And what we need to do is take power that has been centralized in some bureaucracy or in some establishment institution, and return it to ordinary people." That's a Jeffersonian impulse. Jefferson of course wanted to empower the yeoman farmer. Jefferson's a complicated character, and we can at some point think more about whether he's a good representative, truly, of what I call Jeffersonian values, he himself. But the impulse was that he was afraid of the crown and was afraid of centralized bureaucracy and wanted to keep power to land-owning citizens.

These two impulses today are quite prevalent within progressivism, and you can see them in some of the issues that we count among the top of our agenda. If you were to walk into a coffee shop in Washington, D.C. and see a young progressive and ask them, "What are your top two issues?" you would not be shocked if they said climate change and reproductive rights. No one would think twice if someone said that. But of course, climate change is by definition a Hamiltonian endeavor. We're trying to empower some institution to stop big polluters from emitting carbon. That's a tragedy of the commons, and it requires power to be transferred from those individual companies, from the people that are making decisions to pollute, to some institution that will tell them to stop.

Reproductive rights, by the same standard, is an explicitly Jeffersonian idea. We don't want a bureaucrat telling a woman what she can and cannot do with her body. We want to return that power to the individual. So from the beginning, you'll see in the book, from the beginning progressivism has always been ridden with these two conflicting impulses — and again, I really want to stress, not between moderate progressives and liberal progressives or far left progressives. Each individual progressive, all of us, share both of these impulses.

And the question is: What balance do we put the two in, and which lens do we use to understand each individual challenge? And without having language around it, Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian… Those are just words designed to give some definition to these two impulses, so that people can think for themselves, "Aha, here we have this problem X. As a progressive, what is the approach that we ought to take to solve this problem? Is this a problem of power being coagulated in some institution above us and that needs to be returned? Is the problem a tragedy of the commons, where we need some institution to help lead us to a common good?" We're not having that conversation now. And I think for progressivism to thrive, we need to be able to articulate the two approaches that we have and then be able to think through which should be applied in each given circumstance.

Geoff Kabaservice: And I believe it's part of your thesis that, yes, that young staffer in the Democratic office would say that climate change is one of their big issues, and yet because their mentality is so much in the Jeffersonian camp at this point, they're actually hostile to the kinds of Hamiltonian government actions that to be taken to successfully address climate change.

Marc Dunkelman: You're right. This is sort of a distinction between the head and the heart. In our own self-conception, progressives are the party of government, and we have some idea that if only we could have a northern European-style welfare state, and the government could control government services and the social contract in the way that they might in Sweden, that we would all be better off. But in our hearts, we are so bought into the core idea that is Caro's thesis in *The Power Broker*, that power is almost inherently evil, that centralized power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. It's the Actonian principle. Lord Acton was a conservative, but that notion is so deeply woven into the progressive psyche today — or I guess into the progressive heart today — that our impulse, almost reflexive, is to say, "Here is a problem. It has been created by greed, by the powerful few, by special interests. The thing that we need to do is in some way to pull that power back down."

It's reflexive. We don't even think about it. That is our immediate impulse. And in some cases that is right. I don't want to dismiss that Jeffersonian impulse as wrong, to say that there aren't moments where we have abusive institutions that have too much power that need to be tamed. But you're absolutely right that the head and the heart seem to be pulling progressives in different directions today. And our self-conception that we are for big government is really not in line with the agenda that our hearts demand, which is generally to thwart government.

Geoff Kabaservice: And it follows from this that another of your major themes is that this excessive tilt toward the Jeffersonian is now a major political liability for the progressive movement. As you put it, "Our cultural aversion to power renders government incompetent, and incompetent government undermines progressivism's appeal."

Marc Dunkelman: That's right. This is really the core of the reason that I wrote the book. It's that when I talk to many of my fellow progressives and they kvetch about the Trump dynasty and they try to explain to themselves why it is, their focus is so frequently on what Trump has done: "He has pulled the wool over the voters' eyes. He is a shyster who has somehow tricked people into thinking that he's for them when he's actually for the mega-rich. He's going to be elected on the backs of the working class and then pass tax cuts for the very rich. He's a liar and a louse." I have no real interest in disputing any of that, but we don't have any control over it. And the core value proposition of our movement is that we will somehow wield power, in a way that will improve people's lives, through government.

And if government isn't working, then the core value proposition that we provide them isn't appealing. If you create a situation where your head says, "I'm going to empower government," your heart leads you to put so many strictures on public authority that government can't actually produce housing or rail or cheap energy or growth or social mobility or what have you. If you render government incompetent, voters are going to turn to the party that vilifies government — it only makes sense. The impulse for writing the book is to say we need to fix our own house. We need an agenda that makes government work. That's the best way for us to beat populism.

Geoff Kabaservice: You have another superb anecdote in your book, from New York City, about how incompetent government caused by Jeffersonianism led directly to the rise of Donald Trump. And this is the Wollman Rink episode of 1986. Can you tell me more about that?

Marc Dunkelman: In the 1950s, New York City in its go-go years built a little ice skating rink in Central Park, not far from the Plaza Hotelm, called Wollman Rink. In the late '70s, the city realized that the rink was coming due for a refurbishment, and so they planned to replace it and use a new technology: rather than using brine, they would cool the rink with Freon. And so the Park Department ripped up the rink and then began the process of rebuilding. But there had been a law passed decades earlier called Wicks Law, and the Wicks Law had been passed by progressives worried that municipal government would be corrupted by the impulse of mayor of Schenectady, say, to create public works that he could hire his brother-in-law to do. That was such a temptation to corruption. And so instead of allowing municipal government to just hire a general contractor to do a job like rebuilding Wollman Rink, they required the city to divide the work into different contracts: the electrical contract, the concrete, the plumbing, what have you. There would never be a general contract. It would all be done separately.

And this of course may have prevented some corruption, but it also made the process of actually rebuilding Wollman Rink almost impossible to manage. There could be no general contract, there could be no centralized authority that was held responsible for doing this competently. And so exactly as you would have expected, in the early '80s, over the course of years, the whole thing turned into a mess. And when the Parks Department finally paved over the wiring that they'd left exposed for years and the piping that had been exposed, the rink didn't work.

This was a huge embarrassment for (((Ed Koch)))'s administration, and he didn't know what to do. He had already spent millions of taxpayer dollars on an incompetent project, and he's left with this mess and doesn't know what to do. He's going to have to start over again, when he gets a letter from a developer in New York City saying, "Let me do it for you. Just hand me the rink. I will do it at a fraction of a cost. I'll manage it as a private enterprise. I'll get it done. If it costs less, you'll get the savings. If it costs more, I'll cover the difference. It's a no-lose proposition for the voters of New York and the taxpayers of New York." And Koch who is beside himself with the incompetence of his own Parks Department, says "Fine, you do it."

That's exactly what happens. The developer takes it over. It's basically, you rip up the old piping, you put some piping down, you layer it over with some concrete. It opens ahead of schedule and under budget. People are thrilled. The developer's name is Donald Trump. And he arrives at the skating rink, and he is a municipal hero here in liberal New York City. Everyone is fed up with the incompetence of public authority, and this guy has fixed it.

There's a quote that I found in, I think, an old Joyce Purnick column from the *New York Times*. She interviews someone who says, "Anyone who can get anything done in this city is worthy of a ticker-tape parade." And you can only imagine what a young Donald Trump thought when he read that. Of course that's exactly what he wanted: a ticker-tape parade for himself. And the thesis of my book is that this essential play of Donald Trump seeing that even progressives, even working-class people who generally believe in progressive values, are frustrated when government itself doesn't work — that that was an insight that he pulled right there. He understood it maybe implicitly even before the Wollman Rink fiasco. But his entire political career is based on this insight, which is that people are fed up with an incompetent public bureaucracy and they want some strongman figure to come in, break through the "deep state," which is what he calls what was… The "deep state" that he talks about today is just the Parks Department of the mid-1980s in New York City, both of which are sort of incompetents standing in the way of the public interest.

And he's made an entire political career of this. For all that (((Adam Serwer))) has made famous the phrase "the cruelty is the point," here you have incompetence — public sector incompetence is really at the core of Trump's appeal. And he's been playing that card now for decades, and it's an enormously effective card — not just because he plays it well, but because the fundamental story here about government not working rings true and in many cases *is* true. It's true at the federal level, at the municipal level, at the state level. In too many cases, progressives have come to defend an indefensibly incompetent institution, and that's a losing political strategy.

Geoff Kabaservice: Of course, Republicans and conservatives have for decades been trying to lower public trust in government and its institutions. But it has to be said that the progressives have themselves, through incompetence, helped to lower that public trust as well, thereby handing an advantage to people like Donald Trump.

Marc Dunkelman: Yes. I don't think that progressives mean to undermine it. I think they have responded in legitimate and well-intentioned ways to the abuses of certain government authorities. That's the lesson of the Vietnam War, of (((Robert Moses))), of Robert McNamara, of the municipal authorities during the Civil Rights movement who turned fire hoses on protesters, of Watergate. In all these cases, there were legitimate examples and illustrations of power used for nefarious purposes. And for legitimate reasons, progressives said, "Aha — the problem is centralized authority. And so we are going to reform the way government works so that abusers can't take advantage." And that's not to be indicted. In most cases, those reforms are born from good intentions and for real reasons. But if you go so far in your response to bad government to make it so that government can't function, you're setting the table for Donald Trump and populism to win.

Geoff Kabaservice: This isn't quite a major theme of your book, but there is a yin-yang relationship between progressivism as it first surfaced in the progressive movement and populism as it had manifested itself several decades earlier with the populist movement. And the progressive movement was in a way a middle-class professionalization of some of the reform impulses of populism, but also came along with a certain disdain for the working class, the mob. Is that fair to say?

Marc Dunkelman: I think that is fair to say. I mean, there are some… The early Hamiltonian impulses within the progressive tradition, the sort of notion that there is a mob, that there are working-class stiffs who are incompetent to handle the very important jobs of government — of determining what should be in the school curriculum, who should have a municipal contract, how the park should be shaped — that should be taken from the hands of working-class voters, who were in many cases represented by political machines.

That is right there at the heart of progressivism. There's just no doubt about it. And you see it in the settlement house movement, you see it throughout. There's an explicitly what we would now call "patriarchal" mentality to Hamiltonian progressivism that is both useful — in the sense that in many cases, absent a centralized authority figure, you would not have a sewer system or a public transportation system or an electrical system — but that is unmistakably ugly in the sense that it is disdainful of many of the people that it hopes to serve. And that's something that progressives need to own. Today the movement's disdain for patriarchy, for "the Man," for the establishment, is sort of a reaction to the movement's own historic embrace of a whole series of policies and a certain mentality that was dismissive of the opinions and views and proclivities of people who are of a "lower class."

Geoff Kabaservice: Is this a generational question in part? Because it seems to me that the New Left was very important in forming the mentality of the baby boomers, which was very Jeffersonian, much more so than their elders. And whereas some of the Hamiltonian leaders on the progressive side in the decades after World War II were kind of wreathed in glory for having done so much to address the Depression through the New Deal and then to win World War II, by the 1960s the New Left is out to poke holes in their armor. And this kind of carries over into the mentality, it seems to me, of the whole baby boomer generation.

Marc Dunkelman: That's exactly right. The impulse of the "Greatest Generation" was to venerate centralized repositories of power, and for good reason. The New Deal, and the various people who led the bureaucracies in the alphabet soup of New Deal programs, and the generals who had led us to victory in the Second World War, and George Marshall who had led the rebuilding of Europe as Secretary of State under Truman — in all of these cases, there were these heroic figures. And that was a generational response: that centralized authority was, for the most part, good.

And you see it in the remarkable way that the Tennessee Valley Authority rebuilds an area of the country, the Upper South — which is basically the size of England. The fellow who… No one remembers him now, but there was a fellow that FDR put in charge of that, David Lilienthal, who was just enormously powerful. And he wired up all these poor farms and by some mechanism, which we would find very offensive today, really almost like an imperial regent, remade an entire section of the country — I think probably mostly for the good. But you can only imagine the number of people whose farms were taken by flooded rivers and reservoirs, and whose livelihoods were uprooted because they were in the way of some sort of TVA project — in a way that we would never stomach today.

And then in the late '50s, early '60s, you begin to see the rumblings of a younger generation that does not have this fealty to centralized power at all, and is fundamentally and culturally averse to it. It starts with C. Wright Mills talking about "The Power Elite" in the late '50s, The Port Huron Statement of the New Left in the early '60s. And if you read the Port Huron Statement, which is sort of the founding document of the New Left, you see that is a statement that is indicting the Kennedy administration. That is a fight within progressivism.

And their view is that what (((David Halberstam))) would label derisively "The Best and the Brightest" — these very competent figures inside the Kennedy administration who were supposed to fix everything for us — were in fact not working in the public interest. They were themselves corrupted and self-interested and incompetent. And so there they took an explicit… The Port Huron Statement is an explicitly Jeffersonian doctrine, in the idea that it is designed to steer progressivism away from its old Hamiltonian doctrine and return power to ordinary people. And that is the same mentality that runs through almost all the movements that define the '60s: the counterculture, the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement… From soup to nuts, the thing that draws these elements of progressivism together is an aversion to the establishment, an aversion to power.

The Power Broker comes out in 1974, within weeks of Nixon's resignation, which of course is… Watergate is sort of the apotheosis, the moment where it's so clear that centralized power has been corrupting in this country. By the mid-'70s, by the time Jimmy Carter is elected, there's just no doubt now that the boomers are of age (for the most part), they're voting, they are the country's future, and that their political orientation is against power. Even if they're progressive, their orientation is to be very suspicious of centralized authority. And again, that's not to say that they were wrong. There were all these abuses. The Naderite movement and the consumer movement and the environmental movement and the civil rights movement — they're all reacting to legitimate grievances. But incompetent government isn't good for anybody.

Geoff Kabaservice: What's the way back, then, for the progressive movement? How do they actually strike a better balance — "come full circle," as you put it — toward including some better respect for Hamiltonianism, for power, for leadership in a way that leads to good government?

Marc Dunkelman: Well, you can see these two impulses, Hamiltonianism and Jeffersonianism, as two ends of a teeter-totter. And during the height of (((Robert Moses)))' reign as the czar of New York City, we were too heavily weighted towards Hamiltonianism. And over the course of the last fifty years, we've become too weighted towards Jeffersonianism. My view is that we need to strike a better balance. It is not to go back to the age of (((Robert Moses))), it is to find some medium where in every venue we are at least thinking through these two impulses. We're saying, "Here's a crisis in healthcare. Is it better solved with a patient's bill of rights?" — which is a Jeffersonian solution. "Is it better solved with some version of a stronger centralized bureaucracy?" — which is a Hamiltonian solution. "What is the approach that makes the most sense in this given challenge?" And in general, it is to be thinking that both of these impulses are legitimately progressive. Neither of them is outside the realm.

My fear is that progressives themselves begin to have this fight amongst themselves. And those who have a Jeffersonian perspective see anyone with a Hamiltonian perspective as a sellout, and those who have a Hamiltonian perspective see anyone with a Jeffersonian perspective as a sort of a far-out crazy person. The truth is that we all have both of these impulses in our hearts and minds, and we need to find the right balance. We need in most cases to give people a voice without a veto, so that we can hear people's concerns about the housing that someone wants to build or the rail line that needs to be constructed, or the clean energy project that requires a transmission line thorough a forest. We can look at all of these concerns and all these trade-offs, and then come fairly expeditiously to some sort of conclusion that people accept, that there are costs to transmission lines and new housing and various public challenges.

But this is what government is for: to choose between imperfect alternatives and then to move forward. It can't be that the perfect is the enemy of the good. It can't be that our fear of government makes it that we make government incompetent. We've got tough choices to make here, and we need government to be able to make them expeditiously. That's the way forward for progressives.

Geoff Kabaservice: Your book looks forward to a second Trump administration, even though you don't predict it happening. But even though you were writing it well before the 2024 election, I think all of your predictions were verified in that book, or at least maybe your worst fears is the way to put it. But I wonder that the younger generation is going to look at the Trump administration as an example of big government being used to attack Trump's enemies and will therefore think that that's what effective government looks like, and therefore they'll want something completely different.

Marc Dunkelman: I think in most cases… I can't predict the future, but I think that people want government to deliver. I think that people have real concerns and that their notion is what (((Walter Lippmann))), the great visionary — or I don't know what you would call (((Walter Lippmann))), the eminent journalist of the early twentieth century who died in the 1970s — called "the stories in our heads." The world is so complex it's impossible to understand how everything is working, so we collapse reality into a story that makes sense to us.

And the story at the moment among progressives — I guess among everyone — is that government is fundamentally incompetent. And if government is incompetent, we're going to steer power to some other institution, or least steer it away from those incompetents who can't rebuild the bridge or can't build the power line. And my hope is that whatever Trump does, we come away from these four years — certainly right now, with progressivism in the wilderness — with an agenda that will convince ordinary people that government can be trusted, that we have heard their frustrations, that we've seen that the institution that we believe is so key to them being able to improve their lives, that that institution itself can be improved and that we're willing to make those reforms.

My hope is that we use this time in the wilderness to hone our own… not our message, but to hone our own agenda, and to return it to a place where people have a voice and not a veto. And that we are hearing the frustration of voters and not dismissing it as them being victims of a hoax by Trump, that he's some sort of working class champion. But that we hear their frustration that the institution that is important to their lives isn't delivering, and so we come out with something much more competent to answer their concerns.

Geoff Kabaservice: May it be so. Well, Marc Dunkelman, thank you so much for talking with me today. And congratulations on your new book, *Why Nothing Works*, which I think is going to be at the center of a lot of conversations going forward.

Marc Dunkelman: Thanks so much for having me. Pleasure to be here.

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